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INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L AMMAN 004592

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/01/2017

TAGS: [JO](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#)

SUBJECT: JORDAN ELECTIONS: CHRISTIAN CANDIDATES CAMPAIGN  
ACROSS CONFESIONAL LINES

REF: A. AMMAN 4277  
[B.](#) AMMAN 4547

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador David Hale  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶1.](#) (C) Summary. With nine designated seats in Jordan's parliament, Christian candidates are competing for votes within their own communities and among Muslim voters as well.

This causes many to run a broad campaign focused on a national agenda rather than local or Christian specific concerns. For this reason, some are saying that the quota for Christians is no longer necessary, while others doubt that Jordanian society is ready for an official end to the current system of designated seats for minorities. End Summary.

[¶2.](#) (SBU) Christians are allocated nine seats in Jordan's 110 member parliament (REF A). There are Christian seats in Amman, Irbid, Zarqa, Madaba, and Ajloun (one each), as well as in Balqa and Karak (two each). Unlike the nationally calculated quota for women (REF B), the Christian seats are allocated based on votes received by specific candidates who are running for one of the allocated seats in a specific district. Any voter, regardless of religious affiliation, can cast their ballot for a Christian candidate as long as they live in one of the districts that are allocated a Christian seat. There is a tendency for Christian candidates to be Palestinian-origin as well, especially in Amman (see below).

Identity Politics

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[¶3.](#) (C) Christian candidates often see their electoral quota as a double-edged sword. Most are happy that the government sees fit to grant them special status, yet at the same time none of the candidates we talked to were running as Christians per se. This decision can mostly be chalked up to the electoral math of Jordanian politics. Christian candidates in theory face a lower threshold in order to win election to the parliament - there are fewer candidates vying for these seats, and the community seems small enough that a candidate can easily get out his or her message. The reality, however, is that bloc voting and tribal loyalties muddy the picture considerably for Christian candidates. Since any voter can vote for any candidate regardless of their religious or ethnic origin, Christian voters have a hard time pinpointing their constituencies. This often leads them to run far more general campaigns that appeal to Muslim and Christian voters alike, in the knowledge that blocs of tribal votes are routinely swapped and that Christian voters will often cast their ballots for Muslims.

Is the Quota System Outdated?

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¶4. (C) "The quota for Christians is no longer necessary," says Theodore Al-Deyr, a Christian candidate from Amman. "The quota was established many years ago, and it was probably a good thing back then. But now there is little practical difference between Christian candidates and Muslim ones. Christians are an indivisible part of Jordanian society, so why separate them out in the elections?" A Christian candidate from Madaba acknowledges that his campaign is focused more on Jordanian nationalism than the issues of the Christian community. "I am running for a Christian seat, but I am not a Christian candidate," he says.

¶5. (C) Audeh Qawas, incumbent Christian MP from Amman, and a candidate for re-election, disagrees. While he wishes that Jordan's political system was ready for the dissolution of the quota system, he says that the "culture is not ready" for such a change. While his campaign materials relegate his status as a Christian candidate to a side note, he actively portrays himself as a defender of Christian interests in parliament. This has led to some controversy, as he is seen as a candidate that only defends the interests of Orthodox believers rather than the community at large. (He retorts that as a two-term member of the executive committee of the World Council of Churches, he is an "ecumenical candidate".)

¶6. (C) While Christian candidates and voters seem content with the set aside seats they are granted in Parliament, the issue of where they are located is a cause for concern. Candidates point out that large Christian populations live in districts where there are no designated Christian seats, effectively cutting off those communities from representatives who are elected to represent their interests. Similarly, Christian candidates in districts without a Christian seat are barred from running, as the non-quota

seats in parliament are designated for Muslims only. This effectively disenfranchises the significant section of the Christian community that lives outside of the districts that contain Christian seats. Note: The same problem exists for the other set aside seats. Bedouins, Chechens, and Circassians are only allowed to run for seats in their designated districts, in spite of the fact that many now live elsewhere. End Note.

#### Finding A Constituency

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¶7. (C) Christian candidates find it difficult to pinpoint Christian voters in the first place, and harder still to disseminate their message within the community. It is illegal for candidates to stump in religious buildings, regardless of their faith. Still, some candidates report that churches occasionally organize side events at church social halls where candidates can speak. A candidate in Amman expressed frustration at the unwillingness of local churches to organize larger scale campaign events. He sent letters and made phone calls to local parishes in the hope that they would hold a debate or allow him to address their social gatherings, but received negative responses. Instead, he visited Christian charities and went door-to-door in known Christian neighborhoods in the hope of reaching out to his supposed natural constituency. Another Amman candidate tried to gather candidates and churches together for a debate, but neither group was willing to follow through. Instead, he visits with local church elders and notables in the hope of expanding his message throughout the community.

¶8. (C) The extent of Muslim voters' influence on who fills Christian seats is a subject of debate. A Muslim candidate in Madaba remarked that "Christians vote for Christians, and Muslims vote for anyone." A candidate in Amman appealed to unity among Christians by telling his potential supporters that Muslim voters had effectively selected the winners of the Christian seat in several recent elections. In Madaba, we were told that the Islamic Action Front (IAF), which was not running a candidate of its own in the district, was instead supporting a candidate for the Christian seat. The

contact claimed that the IAF threw its support behind the Christian candidate in order to defeat one of his competitors, which the party saw as a "Zionist". Another candidate in Amman heard a mufti remark on television that it was "preferable for Muslims to vote for someone who they will see in heaven," implying that Muslims should only vote for other Muslims. The statement later contradicted on the record by several local religious sheikhs who supported his candidacy. He is running on the slogan "my culture is an Islamic Arabic culture", designed to appeal to voters across religious and political lines.

#### "Whales" Struggle for Competitive Districts

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¶9. (C) In spite of the perception of a lower bar for Christian seats, competition is fierce. The Christian seat in Amman's third district is particularly competitive this time around. Audeh Qawas, a sitting parliamentarian running for re-election, faces a strong challenge from Tareq Khoury, a self-financed challenger with deep pockets. Qawas characterizes the race as a contest between "whales", whose presence in the community dwarfs that of smaller candidates looking for a piece of the pie. He says that his race is symbolic of a more sophisticated, well-funded campaign season within the Christian community in comparison to past contests. In order to win the seat, Qawas estimates that he will have to pull in over 1,000 Muslim voters (although the prevalence of constituency transfers, to be reported septel, make it difficult to deal in exact figures). While there are rumors of corruption surrounding Qawas, Khoury is also accused of buying his seat on the board of a prominent local sports club and using it as a platform for campaign activities. A tracking poll by the International Republican Institute (IRI) shows that Qawas and Khoury are within the margin of error of each other, with Khoury showing a slight lead.

¶10. (C) Two other races for Christian seats, along with the Qawas-Khoury contest, have proven to be among the most intense and bitter rivalries of the election. In Karak, two Zreikats, the incumbent Abdullah and challenger and front-runner Fawaz - whose wealth is reportedly due to Iraq-related business deals and who is said to have ties to Tariq Aziz - are battling it out for the one Christian seat in Karak's first district. In Madaba's first district, Mustafa Hamarneh and front-runner Riyad Al-Yacoub are engaged in another tight race.

#### Comment

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¶11. (C) In the current election cycle, stronger Christian candidates are purposefully shedding their niche mandate (while also playing to their supposed base) in order to amass the votes they need to win. The opposite is also true - as Christian populations shift to areas without a designated seat, Muslim candidates must appeal to their issues and concerns. It is the emergence of the "whales" that points to a possible future integration of Christian candidates into the larger national system that would lessen the need for a Christian quota. In effect, the current electoral law hems in Jordan's Christian candidates to their designated districts, even when their appeal is of necessity broader. If, as some in the media and political classes are beginning to argue, Jordan ever changes to a party list system, Christian candidates are will be ready for national level campaigning that reaches across confessional lines.

Hale